

Teaching Philosophy

I am an engaged educator who approaches teaching and scholarship from a systems perspective, in which I place concern on the connections between people through a relationship lens. Teaching is communicating and revolves around growing and maintaining relationships with students - as whole people. I approach teaching and research with students in a supportive and caring way.

When doing so, the learning is richer, and the students are more willing to take chances. My students are more satisfied because they experience an atmosphere of mutual purpose, mutual respect, and high levels of physiological ownership (engagement). Increased satisfaction leads them to face assignments/tasks more willingly and with a stronger commitment to learning. Students engage in my courses and their research because they feel trusted, free, and safe to speak out. This is how I provide the right conditions for all students to develop and grow.

In all the forms that my teaching takes on, I try to maintain openness toward others through equity, acceptance, and respect for diversity. I look to provide an atmosphere of sensitivity by demonstrating an awareness of and inclusion for all areas of diversity while being accountable for my actions.



Creating a safe space for learning storytelling with Bruce Kirchoff at UNCG's Greensboro Project Space | Photo credit: Adam Carlin

Application

My University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) teaching story starts in the freshman classroom, evolves off-campus with undergrads, moved to support communication for UNCG in the Speaking Center, shifted as faculty became a group I taught, then extends to my work with grad students in both a Master in Public Administration (MPA) class and scientific communication efforts. Most of my teaching and pedagogical scholarly work over the past 20 years happened in the Speaking Center. I typically taught the 300-level Speaking Center Theory and Practice course, the 400-level Speaking Center internship course, and an independent study each semester. I developed and teach a summer 400-level storytelling course and the MPA oral communication course. I also teach first-year students in the Introduction to Communication Studies course.

When teaching, my focus is always on creating hands-on, practical, and creative learning opportunities. This aligns with presenting an atmosphere of mutual purpose, mutual respect, and high levels of physiological ownership. It allows students to work toward their solutions rather than



teacher-focused end products and allows learning without rigid guidelines and expectations. I measure success quantitatively and qualitatively through problem-solving,

real-world experience, immediate application, and reflection.

My pedagogical work is featured in over 30 peer-reviewed publications, 12 conference manuscripts, with 50+ conference pedagogical innovations presented. I have mentored 16 student-published manuscripts and 18 student conference presentations. I was Chair of the UNCG Speaking Intensive committee and supported summer general education revision efforts for Oral Competency, and received a College of Arts and Sciences diversity grant. I have presented over 40 faculty development workshops.

Philosophy

I want students to be productive and to feel like they belong. I do not compromise on thoroughness and exhaustiveness. I treat my students as adults and see my job as helping them learn. I design pedagogical opportunities that honor who my students are as learners and allow me to achieve the atmosphere I seek. I focus on students' self-concept, their motivation to learn, and leveraging their experiences as a framework that provides everyone with opportunities to grow.

I encourage my students to create their own solutions, no matter who they are as learners. I see this positively impact on both student development and growth. The exploration of this framework, first through my own learning and then through application with students, is the subject of a chapter I published [Cuny, K. M. (2018). *The Work Around: How teaching with andragogical practices can normalize learning disabilities in education*. In M. S. Jeffress (Ed.), *International Perspectives on Teaching with Disability*. (pp. 205-217). Routledge, NY: New York].

Self-concept: Our freshmen arrive with little of the self-direction that comes with increased maturity. To address this lack, I challenge the students in my internship with the creation of their own course calendars. By pushing students toward self-directed educational pursuits, they succeed. Another example: I charge graduate students with researching an issue with a local application in Greensboro. This allows them to dive deeper into a topic of concern while seeing it through a local lens.

I build failure into my assignments. Success is not always what students experience and so I also embrace the "do-over". In my oral communication graduate course when most students presented speeches demonstrating little increased competency over the last assignment, I invited the "do-over" to be completed outside of class. This requires self-direction and while it challenged their self-concept at first, completion increased their self-concept and speaking competencies.

Students are not used to these types of power differentials. One of my undergrads provides an extended explanation of the power differential this practice embraces in a published essay: Moss, T. (2019). Analyzing Communication Center Training Through the Lens of Foucault. *Communication Center Journal*, volume 5 (No 1). 175-177. <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ccj/article/view/1963>

Their increased self-concept has led some of my former undergrads to go on to study speaking centers as a topic in grad school. In 16 years, three students have received partial scholarship funding and six have gone on to study with full scholarship funding at five different institutions. Nine of my former students have become center professionals. They all point to their increased self-concept and internal motivations when they were my students for their success.

Motivation to learn: A former student said, *you help save students*. If this occurs, it is because I teach about “the workaround” and make sure they have the tools they need to thrive. When approaching teaching as a relationship, I meet students where they are, baggage and all. I help each student to identify their motivations to learn. That includes dealing with their baggage. To work with a student seeking to win these battles is the epitome of rigor. I aid them in finding, chasing, and holding on to their motivations, rather than attaching themselves to the external motivation of a grade or final. I do fight for their success, especially if they are discriminated against!

My theory students complete a battery of self-tests to understand themselves before they help others. In two reflection assignments, I see an honest evaluation of motivations. Later, they used their motivations when they worked as Communication Consultants in the UNCG Speaking Center. Finding your internalized motivations to learn is powerful.

Upon graduation, students are ready for new challenges because they gained valuable first-hand experience allowing them to develop and identify their motivations to learn. They are able to accomplish their professional and personal goals.

Experience: I wished to tap into the lived contexts of my students as we explored Speaking Center Studies together. From 2015 to 2023, I traveled to the Peacehaven Community Farm in Whitsett, NC, where adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities connect with their communities. We facilitate weekly communication learning modules. Our participants are Peacehaven’s four adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Students develop and facilitate weekly lessons. From the first time they come to the farm, they are leveraging their past experiences as they plan and facilitate the sessions.



Here is another example of how I provide space for students to grow and learn via experience: The internship students speak with my theory students about their experiences each semester. By listening, accepting, and engaging with all student experiences, I teach students things that I might not be able to in a non-reflective educational environment. By tapping into the knowledge students have, and the experiences they are already invested in, they will be more engaged and interested.

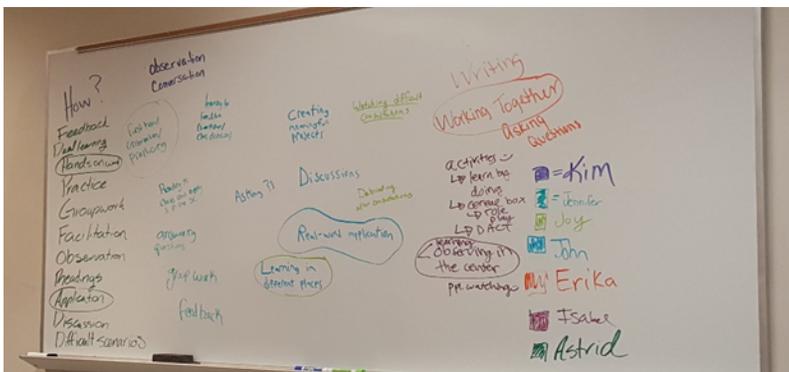
Students who have learned at the farm have leveraged their experiences earning top panel distinction at an international conference, starting careers in various disability fields, conducting disability research, and have published in one of the most prestigious education journals. These students connected their previous lived experiences in creating their own learning opportunities at the farm. This partnership was featured on the UNCG Provost's webpage in 2017 [and again in 2020](#).

Teaching Challenges and How I Meet Them

Something happened in fall 2016. Theory discussions were not as rich. Students were not engaging as they once did. What could I do differently? That is the question I am constantly asking myself as I navigate challenges and relationships with my students. Turns out most students were not completing the readings. In truth, a graduate assistant uncovered this after I discussed what I might do differently with them. I look for evaluative conversations about the job I am doing. I am especially keen to seek input from the people I work with every day. That is one way I improve or enhance my teaching, by asking what is working and what is not – of everyone. Then I figure out what I can do differently for next time.

Later, I added daily quizzes. To make room, I had to remove an assignment. This time I sought input from my internship students to meet a challenge. As theory is a prerequisite for the internship, this group was well-positioned to help me think critically about the course goals and assignments for the theory course. We determined that the quizzes could replace the case study without disrupting outcomes. Adding the quizzes, removing the case study, adding learning goals to the top of each assignment, and making a few adjustments to the course calendar immediately changed the way students engaged in the learning.

In my critical theory course, I also added an end-of-semester critical activity to help with this challenge. I ask my students to identify, on the board with colored markers, how they learned in the course. Next, they identify what they learned. We step back and review all that has been written and



from there revisit the learning outcomes of the course. We talk about each course outcome. Did we meet it? Should it stay in the course document for the next semester? Do we need to add more outcomes? Do any need to be adjusted? This being an experiential course, I once had a hard time getting students to see what and how they learned. This activity

Teaching Innovations

My students do better when I take the time to explain why they need to learn something. My students are convinced that they need to know only after we explore why and understand the value in learning.

In my oral communication graduate course, I designed the whole semester of growth around personal branding. Once students understand why personal branding is important to their student and after-student roles, they are ready to learn. Every assignment contributes to the student identifying

their personal brand. Every competency we learn is framed as something to consider when putting your brand forward in conversation, speechmaking, and digitally.

In designing my storytelling course, I took a contract learning approach allowing students to determine how much they needed to know. For example, the number of professional storytellers they critiqued was tied to the grade they would earn. The more they watched and critiqued, the more their own telling was informed. I returned many written critiques for “do over. This coupled with my overall approach to teaching had one student reflect; *this class was one of the most enjoyable classes I have taken in my college career. The lack of formality and the respect for the students was really enjoyable for me. The teacher was awesome. I have rarely experienced a teacher that can give students so much freedom and the students learn so*



much. I learned so much about storytelling and completed all my work and wasn't pressured to do so in any way. Students get stressed out and anxiety when pressured by teachers and deadlines and the usual college stuff. I thought the lack of pressure was refreshing, and actually made me want to come to class, participate and learn.

Teaching Awards

In addition to national awards for service and research, my teaching has been recognized in the following ways:

In 1998, I was awarded Teaching Excellence for my adjunct performance at Guilford Technical Community College. Each year, one adjunct faculty member is honored with this award. Nominations are solicited from students.

In 2018, I was awarded Teaching Excellence by the College of Arts and Sciences at UNC Greensboro. Each year, one full-time contract faculty member in the college is honored.

In 2020, I was awarded Teaching Excellence by UNC Greensboro. Each year, one full-time contract faculty member from across campus is honored.

In 2025, I was awarded the Thomas Undergraduate Research Mentor Award by UNC Greensboro. Each year, one full-time contract faculty member from across campus is honored.

Summary

Coupled with high expectations, critical reflection, and practical experiences, my hyper-focus on relationships and people serves my students well. I recently heard from a student who took my 100-level Introduction to Communication course at UNCG 18 years ago. His testimony about one

class's impact on his personal and professional successes included a nod to my passion for teaching. I am indeed a passionate teacher!